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SAMUEL WENDELL WILLISTON (1852–1918)

Fellow in Class II, Section 1, 1915

In the death of Doctor Williston, North America has lost one of its oldest and ablest workers in Vertebrate Paleontology. He had specialized in this branch of science since 1874, his especial field being extinct reptiles and amphibians. For the last decade and a half he was head of the Department of Vertebrate Paleontology in Chicago University.

Samuel Wendell Williston was born in Boston (Roxbury), Massachusetts, July 10, 1852; he died at Chicago, Illinois, August 30, 1918. His 66 years of life were strenuous ones, for with many handicaps and against many obstacles he won place for himself as one of the world's greatest authorities on Vertebrate Paleontology. His father, who traced his ancestry in Massachusetts back to 1650, could neither read nor write; he did not like study. His mother had a common school education. In the spring of 1857 the family emigrated to Manhattan, Kansas, at a time when the last 115 miles had to be made by ox-team. After attending the common schools of the town, he entered the State Agricultural College in 1866. Here his teacher of science, Professor B. F. Mudge, had great influence upon his future life. Though Professor Mudge taught all science from natural philosophy, through chemistry, geology, zoology, botany, veterinary science to surveying, conic sections and calculus, he found considerable time for research along geologic and paleontologic lines; and along these lines young Williston naturally became interested. After graduating from college in 1872 he followed Civil Engineering for a year, after which he studied medicine with his family physician. In 1874 he accepted the invitation of a friend to go with him to northwestern Kansas where Professor Mudge was collecting vertebrate fossils for Professor Marsh of Yale University. The following year he again joined the party and as a result of his successful work Marsh invited him to come to New Haven. Here while aiding Marsh in his paleontologic work he continued at intervals his study of medicine, receiving the degree of M.D. from Yale University in 1880 and Ph.D. from the same institution in 1885. On December 20, 1880, Doctor Williston married Miss Annie I. Hathaway of New Haven, Connecticut. Throughout this time, since 1876, he continued collecting vertebrate fossils for Professor Marsh in the western fields during the summer and acting as his assistant in paleontology during the winter. In 1885 he became Demonstrator of Anatomy at Yale and from 1886 to 1890 Professor of Anatomy. During this time he also practised medicine in New Haven. In 1890 he was called to the professorship of geology in the University of Kansas, where he taught invertebrate and vertebrate paleontology, anatomy and medicine, and was also dean of the Medical School. In 1902 he went to the University of Chicago as head of the newly established Department of Vertebrate Paleontology, remaining active here until his death.

Professor Williston was given no opportunity for research and publication by Professor Marsh; hence, with the exception of a brief paper on "American Jurassic Dinosaurs" published in the *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science* in 1878, his published researches in paleontology begin with 1890. While associated with the University of Kansas the majority of his papers appeared in the *Kansas University Quarterly*. During this time his work concerned itself mainly with turtles, plesiosaurs, mosasaurs and pterosaurs from the Permian and Mesozoic of Kansas. At the University of Chicago he could give most of his time to vertebrate paleontology, and here he gradually turned to the more difficult problems of the very early Amphibia and Reptilia. Most of the fossils upon which he worked came from the Texas Permian. This occupied the last decade of his life and in this he probably has made his greatest contribution to science. Two books stand out conspicuously in this last period, "American Permian Vertebrates" 1911, and "Water Reptiles of the Past and Present" 1914. In the latter, especially, Williston not only summarizes the previous knowledge and his latest researches, but gives the information to us in an intensely interesting way. In fact his work on "Water Reptiles" is as absorbingly interesting to read as it is scientifically satisfying in its array of facts. Only a writer thoroughly familiar with the structure and evolution of both past and present reptiles could bring before our eyes so vivid a picture of the swarming seas of the Cretaceous period of earth-history in what is now Kansas. This work is based upon his series of studies, previously published, of Kansas mosasaurs, plesiosaurs, crocodiles, etc., and is animated by the purpose to find out the why of every structure, to reconstruct from the bone fragments the appearance and habits of the living animals. Much of his work is illustrated by his own restorations of the reptiles and their habitats. At the time of his death he was actively engaged on a general work on the "Reptiles of the World, Recent and Fossil." This he began in 1917, and it is most unfortunate for both paleontologic and zoologic science that the many facts stored in his mind on this subject could not have found expression. Though Williston's work concerned itself principally with the ancient reptilian life of what is now central and southern United States, he also published researches upon sedimentary rocks, Mesozoic fish, Cenozoic mammals, including man, and especially upon the living Diptera. When associated with Professor Marsh, Williston despaired of publishing researches in paleontology, so he turned his actively observing mind upon the living flies. His interest in this subject continued to his death, though after 1899 he published in it only occasional papers. Between 1879 and 1899 his listed papers in Diptera total sixty-seven, amongst which is his "Manual of North American Diptera," a book still essential to workers along this line.

To all of us who have known Professor Williston the memory of him is helpful and inspiring. The writer has cause to remember especially his genial friendliness which expressed itself in most cordial generosity with original sketches and notes,— an aid which was extended at a time when Williston's thoughts were absorbed in anxious care of a much loved daughter. When a truly great man passes, his memory endures among his friends, not so much for the material and mental achievements he has accomplished, as for the spirit and inspiration of his service.

HERVEY WOODBURN SHIMER.